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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BAKU 000700

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [AJ](#)
SUBJECT: PREPARATIONS FOR PARLIAMENTARY RERUNS UNDERWAY IN
AZERBAIJAN'S ZAQATALA

Classified By: CDA JASON HYLAND FOR REASONS 1.4 B AND D.

11. (C) SUMMARY: The May 13 parliamentary rerun race in the northwestern region of Zaqatala promises to be the most interesting of an otherwise low-key campaign. Prominent opposition leader Arif Hajili is running in a field of six other serious candidates that includes a government ruling YAP candidate that allegedly has benefited from inappropriate government support. The local authorities -- including a newly appointed ExCom (local governor) and newly appointed Constituency Election Commission Chair -- promised a fair race, but two candidates, the Election Monitoring Center's long term observer and a civil society representative reported that local authorities had been interfering in the race. Post will send an observer team back to Zaqatala on election day to monitor the conduct of the balloting and the vote count. END SUMMARY.

NEW EXCOM PROMISES FAIR PROCESS

12. (C) EmbOffs traveled to Azerbaijan's northern region of Zaqatala May 1-2 to assess the pre-election environment. EmbOffs started the trip by meeting with Asif Asgarov, the appointed regional governor (ExCom) for Zaqatala, who was named to the post three months ago. He replaced the previous ExCom, who had been fired for his role in election fraud in November. Asgarov was formerly a deputy minister of Youth, Sports, and Tourism and apparently, a close friend of now Culture Minister Abulfaz Garayev. Asgarov told us he had twice been head of the Azerbaijani delegation to the Olympics; given President Aliyev's personal interest in sports and the Olympics in particular, this is a strong signal that he is well connected with the ruling elite. (NOTE: While the ExCom himself is new, contacts told us that he has not replaced any of the staff below him).

13. (C) Asgarov did not appear to know much about the development or political life of Zaqatala, mainly giving short answers to in-depth questions. He said that he would ensure the elections are run in a free and fair manner and that the campaign had gone smoothly, with no restrictions. He called his population "politically conscious" and predicted a high turnout. The main issues of concern to voters, he indicated, were gas and electricity supplies (which he indicated he had already largely solved) and resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. He also told us that economic development was not a major concern of his citizens, given the growth in the economy recently. (Civil society leaders disputed this point, saying that people from the region increasingly are seeking employment opportunities in Baku or abroad). Asked what his greatest challenge in the past three months had been, he simply responded that he had no problems or major challenges -- "I am a soldier of my president."

CONEC CHAIRMAN ALSO PREDICTS SMOOTH ELECTION DAY...

14. (SBU) Zaqatala Villages' ConEc 110 is chaired by Fikrat Mustafayev, who headed a precinct election commission in Zaqatala City ConEc 111 during the November election. He told PolOff he had been cited for running a model election and was confident the May rerun would go well. He indicated he didn't have a good grasp of why ConEc 110 had gone so badly in November, but surmised it was probably due to poor training of election commission members and lack of awareness on the part of voters. He said his role was in part to prevent fraud this time around, and said commission members at every level were aware of their roles and responsibilities. He also predicted higher voter turnout, due mainly to the "intense campaign" amongst the candidates and the high level of voter interest he had witnessed.

15. (SBU) The Chairman said there had been few complaints thus far, although two candidates (Musavat candidate Arif Hajili and independent candidate Elnura Madatova) had complained that the ConEc was restricting their freedom of assembly rights. The ConEc chairman dismissed these complaints, saying that in one case the candidate had not given sufficient notice of a planned rally and that in general the candidates tried to hold public meetings in Zaqatala proper, which is not within the boundary of the constituency. He also indicated he was looking into telegrams he had received complaining that Hajili was inciting ethnic clashes through nationalistic speeches on his paid airtime. (The ExCom also referenced this situation, which to us sounds suspect -- the complaints apparently all contain the same text. The CEC took up this issue during its May 5 session and it appears the complaint will be disregarded.) The chairman pre-emptively assured us the ExCom was not interfering in the process and has been helpful to the ConEc, including ensuring

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all its technical needs are met. (The meeting was a difficult to conduct; while the ConEc chairman was happy to sit and answer our questions, he almost spent more time arranging tea and snacks than actually talking with us).

...BUT EMC THINKS OTHERWISE

16. (SBU) The Election Monitoring Center's (EMC) long term observer (LTO) for the ConEc painted a dramatically different picture of the election campaign. He indicated that while the observers themselves had only been witness to a few instances of violations, they had heard sufficient complaints from candidates and seen enough evidence to be fairly pessimistic about the chances for a clean election day. He predicted "lots of fraud" during election day and during the vote count, based on interference by the ExCom, his deputies, and the municipal councils to date. He indicated that even though the former ExCom had been fired for his interference, the new ExCom's interference in favor of the ruling Yeni Azerbaijan Party candidate was much more obvious than any actions taken by the previous official. (This was a complaint we have heard from a variety of sources both in Zaqatala and in Baku). In a later conversation with civil society activists, one card-carrying YAP member relayed the same information.

17. (SBU) The EMC LTO also indicated that while candidates have been pressured to withdraw and a few actually had withdrawn, the candidacy of the YAP member had been illegally restored 20 days after he withdrew (The CEC has only three days to restore a person's candidacy). He said that out of the seven candidates currently running, only four were serious candidates -- the YAP candidate, Musavat member Arif Hajili, and two independents. He predicted that in a vote count, the balloting would be fairly close between Hajili and the YAP candidate, with the others falling significantly behind. Overall, though, he said turnout would likely only be around 30 percent. The voters are tired, he said, and "tired of their votes being stolen."

CANDIDATES COMPLAIN

¶18. (SBU) Although PolOff extended an invitation to all seven candidates running, only Hajili and the independent Hajibey Ibrahimov came to the meeting; the YAP candidate confirmed but never surfaced. Hajili and Ibrahimov primarily were interested in describing the various forms of intimidation and pressure the local authorities had put on their campaigns and their families. Their stories largely coincided with EMC's, although they both displayed far more frustration. Both Hajili and Ibrahimov indicated local authorities have used interference tactics including giving political speeches during Friday afternoon prayers in the mosques, tearing down posters, instructing government employees for whom to vote, and telling voters not to attend candidate meetings other than those run by the YAP candidate.

¶19. (SBU) Ibrahimov, a local entrepreneur known for his charity work, said he was asked to run by a number of citizens after the November election was canceled due to fraud. He relayed that the voters had said they had originally voted for an opposition candidate in November, but their votes had been stolen. They asked Ibrahimov to run with the hopes that the authorities would not interfere in his campaign. Ibrahimov told us that he has been pressured to withdraw, including by the ExCom himself. He indicated he had little hope the election would be fair and appeared disappointed with the entire process.

¶10. (SBU) During a meeting with major opposition parties, PolOff spent most of the 90 minutes defending US policy towards Azerbaijan's democratization and explaining why it was important to participate in the process. The party representatives were frustrated by the amount of fraud seen in recent elections and the restrictions they face as regional opposition members, frequently comparing the situation to that in Belarus.

VOTERS RELATIVELY DISINTERESTED

¶11. (SBU) While the ExCom and ConEc chairman professed voter interest in the race, it was difficult for us to verify those claims. Posters were up around town, but not in the massive quantities seen last November throughout most of Azerbaijan. We did, however, see a number of posters for Hajili, in addition to the ruling party candidate. Most voters seemed to be paying little interest; there was little evidence around town that an election was taking place in ten days. We did not see any voter education posters, in contrast to

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November, nor did most citizens seem to be talking about the campaign. Additionally, candidates and EMC reported that voter disinterest was high, mostly due to sheer election fatigue. However, as outsiders, it is difficult to assess with certainty the amount of voter interest until election day, when voter turnout numbers are released.

COMMENT

¶12. (SBU) With prominent opposition leader Arif Hajili running, a new ExCom, and a new ConEc, the May 13 rerun race in Zaqatala is perhaps the most salient barometer for the integrity of the reruns. We will send an observer team back to the ConEc on May 13 to monitor the conduct of the balloting and vote counting and will report septel on election night and during the following week our findings and analysis about election day.

HYLAND